

Performing Arts

Industry Coverage: Performing Arts Operation, Creative Artists, Musicians, Writers and Performers, Performing Arts Venue Operation.

Industry Overview

The Performing Arts incorporates dance, from classical ballet to street performance, live music including everything from the small local gig economy to the West Australian Opera, as well as theatre, puppetry and circus. With its unmatched capacity to bring vibrancy and liveability to the city and regions, and as a major driver of inbound tourism, supporting the sector in a manner which matches people and programs to infrastructure will be vital in coming years. It is pleasing if surprising therefore, that the Western Australian performing arts sector has seen success in recent years despite weathering the fallout of WA's economic downturn on several fronts.

A number of key institutions including the Black Swan State Theatre Company, the West Australian Symphony Orchestra and the West Australian Ballet engaged in international tours, in some cases taking advantage of federal funding offered under the (now defunct) federal Catalyst Fund's Cultural and Diplomacy stream this year. In each case the performances were framed as the most significant activity of the calendar year and were recognised for their capacity to cement the reputation of the companies and the visibility of Western Australia more broadly.

Meanwhile, the Perth International Arts Festival (PIAF) attracted 700 artists across 240 performances with around 360,000 people attending. Ticket sales topped \$4m and with a cost of \$17m, this revenue made a significant contribution towards the not-for-profit event.¹ The PIAF Connect initiative provided a program of opportunities for local practitioners to work with international leaders through masterclasses and workshops, and hosted Perth's first disability arts forum.² PIAF has strong engagement with state-based performing arts companies and as such serves to strengthen the capacity these organisations have to offer performing artists sustainable careers.

The biennial MoveMe festival of contemporary dance attracted record audiences and was viewed as a tremendous success; however its continuation is threatened because of a lack of long-term funding avenues and uncertainty given reduced or uncertain federal and state funding pools.

Western Australia's largest annual performance platform, Fringe World Festival played host to 700+ shows at over 150 venues and performance spaces spread across Perth and further afield in the regions. The 2016/17 Fringe Festival saw another rise in ticket sales, with over 350,000 tickets sold and box office sales exceeding \$10m for the first time.³ Perth Fringe continues to be the fastest growing such festival in the world and whilst it is an excellent platform in providing audience exposure for emerging performers, its self-funding model means that artists consistently report they are unable to make the format work for them financially, with many producing shows at a loss.

Performing Arts organisations report challenges competing with the ever growing Fringe offer for a limited local audience. Permanent sites and organisations have a host of associated costs which drive up ticket prices whilst cheaper Fringe events can create unfeasible price expectations in festival goers.

Additional challenges in the form of reduced philanthropic donations, household discretionary spending and federal funding have led to some institutions eroding their financial reserves or relying on state funding as a larger proportion of overall income. The Perth Theatre Company went into voluntary administration after 30 years of operation in May 2016, citing poor ticket sales

and reduced philanthropic support. Despite current circumstances, most have been able to increase audience numbers, often through reduced ticket price promotions such as Black Swan's Rio Tinto \$20 Tickets, as well as through schools engagement.

The live music sector continues to battle small venue closures driven by high rents, however some industry representatives report seeing signs of a turnaround in conditions, with a small number of new venues opening, and others investing in significant refurbishments. Peak body WA Music is encouraging Labor to roll out its election music policy, which includes a number of measures designed to support and invigorate the contemporary live music sector.⁴

In the midst of such successes and challenges, the artists themselves continue to struggle to piece together sustainable careers. Skills gaps have been identified by industry around fundraising, including attracting corporate sponsorship and exploiting alternative funding streams such as crowd funding. Career management knowledge will also be vital for independent performing artists and should be incorporated within appropriate qualifications.

Whilst solutions will be difficult to find in the current economic climate, industry has concerns around what is seen as the eroding of public recognition of the value of the performing arts and a performing arts career by governments at various levels. Whilst there is broad recognition of the sector's capacity to generate tourism spend and contribute significantly to the liveability of our cities and regions, cuts to funding and increasing fees at both the VET and tertiary levels, coupled with the uncertainty inherent in the performing arts career path itself, threaten to make a performing arts career an unworkable option for an increasing number of people.

Current and future labour market conditions

Statistical analysis of the performing arts labour market is hindered by factors such as the high rate of self-employed artists, the seasonal nature of the work and audience demand for novelty (meaning that there is a large, ongoing exchange of labour across states and internationally when artists take their work to new audiences). A large section of the workforce will self-report as sitting within another field since their primary source of income may not be their performing arts work.

Whilst performing arts institutions rarely report a labour shortage and are still able to be highly selective, the shoestring budget that most organisations work under means that even those with access to sustainable careers through permanent employment will often bear considerable stress on account of persistent understaffing owing to budget constraints. However it is those freelance performing artists seeking to build a sustainable career outside of the companies and without permanent employment who are experiencing the greatest stress. This is viewed by some in industry as a significant crisis.

The creative sector employs 42,000 people and contributes over \$10.6 billion to the state economy however is at risk of decline.⁵ Australia's creative and cultural industries contribute more than \$86 billion (or 6.9%) to the nation's GDP⁶ and the performing arts sector generates revenue of \$1.3 billion p.a. with projected growth at an annualised 0.3% through to 2021.⁷ The main source of income to the arts is consumer spending. Nationally, ticket sales were worth \$1.4b in 2015, with sales to cultural performance events even higher than those for sporting events. Sales were marginally down on 2013/14 however taking a longer view, the sector continues to enjoy modest growth.⁸

Exploring the way international tourists spend their time in Australia has highlighted the growth in arts tourism. There has been 19% growth over the four years to 2016, with 2.4 million international visitors to Australia in 2013–14 engaging in arts tourism.⁹ Recognition of the influence that the performing arts have in this regard is vital given that pressures now being experienced by sections of the workforce could hamper ongoing contribution.

Industry development issues:

For much of the creative industries, the current economic climate has introduced some challenges to sustainability. These challenges include: reduced financial contribution from business; reduced government funding; reduced disposable income across potential audiences; unaffordable rents, which have not decreased in line with reduced revenue (especially for galleries and live music venues). Although a new dance company (Co3) and theatre company (The Last Great Hunt) are finding success in the current climate, others have scaled down their offer or disappeared altogether.

Given this environment, many industry stakeholders report that organisations struggling to stay operational are unable to focus on growth targets. The impact is likely to be felt in the workforce also. All of WA's major performing arts organisations offer significant mentoring, internship or other pathway programs and their ability to continue to service these is a vital link in the workforce chain of the sector.

The Perth Fringe Festival has virtually doubled in size each year over the last four years, with over 1,800 local artists participating in 2015. The seasonal nature of performance work is challenging, with most artists struggling to make their careers financially viable.¹⁰ Much of the growth within the sector is at this end of the market, where tickets are priced in a way that does not account for the higher costs of the performing arts companies that actually employ artists and support workers. This phenomenon, coupled with the increasing costs of education and training, is putting undue stress on the companies and the workforce.

Workforce challenges and issues:

The new VET student loans scheme is viewed as exacerbating workforce pressures, with only 13 of an original 70 creative industries courses currently funded. A significant number of performing arts qualifications were included in the recent cuts, amongst them WAAPA's Advanced Diploma of Elite Dance. Most performing artists face difficulty reaching sustainability in their careers, and coupled with increasing university and vocational education fees, this can make the industry less viable as a career option for many.

There is concern in industry that the unsustainable nature of much performing arts work places undue pressure on the workforce. Following the release of a report into mental health in the performing arts by Victoria University in late 2015, Entertainment Assist was established to reduce 'the shockingly high rates of anxiety, depression, suicide, isolation and other matters associated with working in the Australian entertainment industry'. The issue was reported as being directly related to the stress of sustaining a career in a high-pressure, low-security, poorly remunerated sector.¹¹

Given these pressures, it is unsurprising that the sector continues to report a growing need for an increasingly sophisticated knowledge in the area of income generation. Marketing, outreach and a comprehensive use of social media are essential tools to reach a targeted market and campaign for funds. Artists also require a working knowledge of Intellectual Property and Copyright laws to assist them in protecting their product. Small business and freelance career management skills are more important than ever. Whilst a number of peak organisations seek to provide quality short-duration training to artists, with their own viability under consistent threat, their offerings are both insufficient in depth, and insecure.

Current Training Council areas of focus:

The performing arts rely heavily on interstate and international visitors to deliver continued growth in ticket sales, and the sector broadly punches above its weight in bringing high-spend tourists to the state. Bids to expand audiences have seen a renewed focus on regional touring and this is broadly seen as beneficial to all stakeholders, despite staffing challenges. There are ongoing issues for the sector in accessing appropriately skilled, regionally based technicians to support touring productions. FutureNow collaborated with industry peak body CircuitWest to produce the Royalties for Regions funded Backstage Pass project, which provides a series of instructional videos around must-have theatre technical skills to the transient workforce required to support these productions.¹² The project is now accessible and has over 80 users. FutureNow will continue to work on promoting the resource through 2017-18.

FutureNow continues to work closely with its Performing Arts Industry Advisory Group, and advocate for the appropriate funding of the performing arts sector and the availability of affordable education and training options for prospective performing artists.

Attachments

[Live Performance Australia Ticket Survey 2015](#)

[WA Labor Plan for Jobs](#)

References

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